

**STRATEGY
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**NSC-81/1 AND THE EVOLUTION OF U.S. WAR AIMS IN KOREA
JUNE – OCTOBER 1950**

BY

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ABSTRACT

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The North Korean attack across the 38th Parallel in June 1950 created a crisis for American decision-makers and the newly constituted National Security Council. The convoluted structure of military command responsibilities in the Far East, the relationships among military and political personalities, and the domestic and international political environment significantly affected the crisis decision-making process.

In the event, our response evolved in the period June–October 1950 from restoration of *the status quo ante bellum* along the inter-Korean border to occupation of the North and reunification of Korea. This effect, which we now refer to as “mission creep,” led directly to the intervention of Chinese Communist forces which completely changed the character of the Korean War. The inter-Korean border at the 38th Parallel was effectively restored within three weeks of the Inch’on landings. The decision to pursue North Korean forces and to occupy and reunify North Korea catalyzed a much longer war.

An analysis of how this decision was reached, and a review of the factors involved, makes it a useful model for future policy decisions. The experience is not unique. Political factors in the wake of Somalia (where mission creep led to failure) and the Gulf War (where adherence to our original objectives led to a decade of second-guessing) reveal its relevance. Time alone will tell what our Balkans adventure will bring.

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NSC-81/1 AND THE EVOLUTION OF U.S. WAR AIMS IN KOREA

June – October 1950

As a general rule, it is inexpedient to meddle with questions of State in a land where men are highly paid to work them out for you. This tale is a justifiable exception.

—Rudyard Kipling

In the 1980's, American defense policy was shaped by the successive "doctrines" of Secretary Caspar Weinberger and General Colin Powell. They called for clearly defined mission objectives and articulated "end states" as a precondition to the commitment of American troops to combat. Their ideas were rooted in the frustrations of Vietnam and a perceived absence of direction during the Carter Administration. Their clarity provided a rational context for decision-makers, but proved difficult to reconcile with politically popular engagement strategies. They were short-lived. The 1990's experience with an unsatisfying conflict termination in the Gulf War, disastrous "Mission Creep" in Somalia, quiet failure in Haiti, and an apparently open-ended commitment to the Balkans suggest that we are still relearning earlier lessons.

This paper examines the evolution of our objectives in Korea from the original goal of restoring the *status quo ante bellum* to our abortive attempt to forcibly reunify Korea. A review of the incremental policy formulation and deferred decision making during the first months of the Korean War provides a well documented illustration of the effect of uncertain aims in generating "mission-creep."

Korea was of no consequence to the United States on its own merits before June 1950. That changed rapidly. The emergent Korean War became the first of the Cold War's "limited wars," and the first and only war to involve the United Nations in open hostilities. The restoration of the *status quo ante bellum* was achieved within ninety days. Through failure to clearly articulate defined war aims, failure to define restraints for commanders in the field, and the less than artful assumption of a "wait and see" attitude by decision makers, the hostilities in Korea dragged out into 1953. A major commitment to Korea continues to this day.

THE HISTORY OF KOREA PRIOR TO 1950

Korean history owes much to an unfortunate proximity to China, Japan, and Russia. Variously coveted by Japan as a stepping-stone to the continent or protected as their back door by China and Russia, Korea has rarely been truly independent and free of external control. Early Korea was dominated by China until a ravaging invasion by Japan 1592-1599. After these invaders were driven out, Korea withdrew for centuries into the "Hermit Kingdom," but retained political and cultural ties to China into the late 19th Century.¹ When the growing United States emerged into a Pacific role, it had little regard for the peninsula, considering the Korean government akin to "an incompetent defective not yet committed to

guardianship.”² America, like most western governments focused on China, was both unequipped and disinclined to assume the role of Korea’s guardian.

Backward Korea thus became one of the “stakes of diplomacy”³ as China, Russia, and Japan began an expansionist era in the late 19th Century. Korea achieved nominal independence from China after Japan’s victory in the Chinese-Japanese war of 1894-5, but was subsequently occupied by Japan during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5. The Japanese remained, and gradually assumed such complete control of Korea by 1907 that the “... annexation of Korea by Japan in August 1910 was simply a formality.”⁴ The American government position under President Theodore Roosevelt was to have "... no objections. Japanese control was to be preferred to Korean misgovernment, Chinese interference, or Russian bureaucracy.”⁵

Korea developed structurally and economically under Japanese rule, but was denied a separate cultural and political identity. Heavy-handed Japanese attempts to absorb the Koreans culturally failed to extinguish the idea of Korean nationality. Torture and innumerable floggings “fanned the fires of Korean desire for complete independence. But an attempted revolt was put down with greater cruelty.”⁶ When World War II began, Korea, with such sad a history, “...was regarded by the Allies as a victim of, not a party to, Japanese aggression.”⁷ Allied plans for the Post-War world took account of this status. At the Cairo Conference Britain, China, and the United States announced that, the “aforsaid three great powers, mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea, are determined that in due course Korea shall become free and independent.”⁸ Stalin later acceded to his concept in agreeing to paragraph eight of the Potsdam Declaration, which implemented the terms of the Cairo Declaration and restricted the Post-War sovereignty of Japan.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE THIRTY-EIGHTH PARALLEL

World War II planners in the War and State Departments hoped to take the surrender of Japanese forces in Korea as far north as possible, in order to limit the Soviet role there. That goal was “predicated on the war’s lasting longer than it did.”⁹ The American commitment to Korea thus “opened without preparation.”¹⁰ American troops were poorly positioned for post-war occupation duties on the Asian mainland at the abrupt end of active combat operations. Nowhere was this more evident than in the Japanese-occupied Korean peninsula. China was exhausted and unable to participate in post-war occupation duties in Korea (or anywhere else beyond her own borders). Russia had forces nearby, had clear strategic interests in the Korean peninsula, and was all too ready to grasp the spoils of victory promised by their recent entry into the war against Japan. “Japan’s sudden collapse precipitated arrangements for the surrender of her considerable forces there. The (U.S.) Joint Chiefs proposed that the United States accept surrender in the south (of Korea), nearest Japan, and the Russians in the north, nearest Siberia.”¹¹ The Thirty-Eighth parallel was selected purely out of administrative convenience, and “had virtually nothing to commend it”¹² on military, economic, political, or social grounds.

Despite an opportunity to learn from experience in Europe, Pacific forces were unprepared for the transition to occupation duties. Under orders hurriedly compiled by a joint State-War committee, General Douglas MacArthur was directed to accept the surrender of Japanese forces in Korea south of the 38th parallel and to occupy the area. MacArthur "assigned the duty to the Twenty-Fourth Army Corps under Lieutenant General John R. Hodge. ... The Corps ... had no experience in administering civil affairs and no personnel trained for such a task. Hodge was unequipped for the assignment and was given meager guidance."¹³ The transition was not to be smooth for either the Americans or the Koreans. Russian troops had fought their way into Korea on August 10, and rapidly overran the north. The "... region below the 38th parallel found itself in a state of anarchy for a month on account of the late arrival of American troops."¹⁴ Korean desires for freedom, independence, and self-government quickly became apparent. "In the interval between the Japanese surrender and the arrival of Americans in Korea September 8, Korean leaders and patriots released from Japanese prisons had formed a committee to preserve order and take charge of affairs in preparation for what they supposed would be the independence of their country. ... The group convened a national conference in Seoul, and on September 6 a People's Republic of Korea was established, claiming jurisdiction over the entire country."¹⁵

Unproductive political negotiations and idealistic UN resolutions followed. "In September, 1947, the United States ... referred the question of Korean independence to the United Nations General Assembly. The resolution called for elections throughout Korea, under the observation of a United Nations commission, of a Korean National Assembly, which would then establish a national government. Thereupon the new Korean regime would arrange with the United States and the Soviet Union for withdrawal of their troops. Over Soviet opposition and warnings of 'grave consequences' the General Assembly voted to hold elections throughout Korea. ... On January 23(1948) the Soviets refused to allow the commission to enter the Communist zone to supervise elections there."¹⁶

The ideal of the 1947 United Nations resolution was "an independent, united Korean government."¹⁷ This ideal was doomed by Soviet intransigence. The high-toned but imprecise Security Council Resolutions remained unfulfilled. These unfulfilled resolutions would later play a significant role in justifying the evolution of U.S. aims in Korea. In Secretary of State Dean Acheson's words, we "soon found that the Soviet Union considered the 38th parallel not as a line drawn on a map for the sake of administrative convenience, but as a wall around their preserve."¹⁸ In keeping with the resolutions, however, both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. withdrew occupation forces from the peninsula by 1949. The Russians left a well-trained, well-equipped army in their wake. The Truman Administration limited development of South Korea's armed forces to a constabulary, purposefully unequipped and ill-suited to such adventurous activities as the forceful reunification of the peninsula. Although as CINCFE he was not responsible for the defense of Korea, General MacArthur had acceded to these decisions. He was later to write, however, that while the State Department "idealistcally attempted to prevent the South Koreans from unifying the country by force, they inevitably encouraged the North Koreans along the opposite lines. Such a fundamental error is inescapable when the diplomat attempts to exercise military judgment..."¹⁹

As history would show, General MacArthur would have never accepted a reciprocal assessment of his diplomatic prowess.

THE POLITICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

The general optimism at the end of World War II faded rapidly with the dissolution of the Grand Alliance into Cold War. President Truman's "Containment" Policy originated in the defense of Greece and Turkey, and had blossomed with bi-partisan domestic support for NATO. This did not imply, however, a deep consensus on foreign policy. John Foster Dulles, the future Secretary of State, described the policy of containment as "negative, futile, and immoral."²⁰ The tumultuous end of the 1940's was highlighted by the final collapse of the Nationalists in China, the emergence of the People's Republic of China, and the detonation of a Soviet atom bomb – all of which highlighted the relative weakness of America's armed forces. Early in 1950 President Truman was presented with NSC-68, which called for significant defense expenditure to counter a growing worldwide threat.

The American focus on Europe, combined with continuing defense cuts, drove a scaled back commitment of military resources to the Far East in general and Korea in particular. Nonetheless, we had difficulty defining limited American interests within the broader context of containment. An inter-departmental committee on Korea reported in February 1947 that Korea would be a liability in a general war. According to this study, the United States had "little strategic interest in maintaining troops or bases" there. The committee waffled the issue when it went on to note that "control of Korea by Soviet or Soviet-dominated forces ... would constitute an extremely serious political and military threat to U.S. interests in the Far East."²¹

This ambivalent policy was given voice in a March 1949 interview by General MacArthur and a better-known speech by Secretary Acheson in March 1950: both of which excluded Korea from the American defensive perimeter in East Asia.²² Ever the realist, George F. Kennan noted the withdrawal of American forces from Korea in 1949 and later observed that it, "had not alarmed me. ... those forces, encumbered ... with the ponderous burden of dependents, PXs and other housekeeping paraphernalia which the Pentagon at that time seemed to find indispensable for any American forces stationed abroad, had very little combat capability and would have been more of a nuisance than a help if a need had suddenly arisen for the conduct of military operations."²³

The tenuous bilateral support of a foreign policy of containment in Greece and Turkey, ratification of the NATO Treaty, and funding for the Marshall Plan would not extend to forgiving "the loss of China." In the environment of the Alger Hiss Trial and the persecution of the "China Hands," a Republican Congress still smarting over the 1948 elections gave rise to McCarthyism and began what Secretary of State Acheson referred to as "the attack of the primitives." This brought foreign policy ever more clearly into the realm of partisan politics, distinctly narrowed the political options of the Truman Administration, and contributed directly to the formulation of a flawed and equivocal policy.

CRISIS AS CATALYST

The North Korean attack on June 25, 1950 clearly surprised the Truman administration. Although there had been signs pointing to impending military action somewhere, it was not clear that Korea would be the location. Conducting a world-wide review of potential trouble spots for the State Department, George F. Kennan accepted the view that "the South Korean forces were so well armed and trained that they were clearly superior to those of the Communist north; our greatest task ... was to restrain the South Koreans..."²⁴ With notification of the attack and in coordination with President Truman (who was absent from the capital on a visit to Missouri), Secretary Acheson shaped the early decision to go to the UN. Given our own misappreciation of the relationship between the U.S.S.R. and the fledgling People's Republic of China, and in turn of their lack of control over North Korean actions, it was perhaps natural to mistake the North Korean attack for "an attack launched by the totalitarians against the forces of freedom ... (and) ... the first fought battle in a world dispute."²⁵

The decision to seek a mandate in the United Nations was quickly accepted and approved by the President, but was not universally endorsed within the Administration. Kennan, virtually on the eve of his retirement from the State Department and with sharply waning influence, had a different, if oddly narrow, perspective on the relevance of the United Nations approach to Korea. In his view, we

"... had a perfect right to intervene, on the basis of our position as occupying power, to assure the preservation of order in the territory. We needed no international mandate to make this action proper. Nor did the Charter of the United Nations require us to involve the organization in such a conflict. Article 107, while somewhat ambiguous, conveyed the general impression that problems arising immediately from the recent war were not to be considered proper subjects for the attention of the UN. This was, finally, a civil conflict not an international one; and the term 'aggression' in the usual international sense was ... misplaced..."²⁶

The failure to clearly define the character of this war would undermine our efforts to establish our ultimate objectives, and remained a distraction to policy formulation. As late as mid-July 1950, we were still trying to come to grips with the nature and character of the war. The State Department informed the British Embassy about July 13 that we had not yet "... found it necessary to make any overall determination as to the legal nature of the Korean conflict, i.e. whether it is a civil war or an international war ... Korea should constitute one state with one government. ... Nevertheless it is difficult to fit the Korean conflict into traditional concepts of either civil or international war and ... it is unnecessary for present purposes to do so."²⁷

But the general perception of international aggression prevailed. With President Truman's return to the capital, his advisors gathered at Blair House Meeting on the evening 25 June. During this first meeting on Korea Truman authorized the use of US naval and air power to stiffen South Korean

resistance to invasion. He also clearly stipulated, "that no action should be taken north of the 38th parallel."²⁸

The ad hoc nature of the initial command relationships, rooted in the insignificance afforded Korea, would contribute to future policy difficulties. "Although General MacArthur, as CINCFE, had been relieved of responsibility for South Korea, early US reactions to the North Korean attack on 25 June 1950 were taken through his command, which was conveniently located for the purpose. These initial reactions ... were taken with presidential approval outside the authority of unified command under the UCP."²⁹

THE GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF OBJECTIVES

Our initial stated objective in Korea was the defense of South Korea. Secretary Acheson may have overstated our commitment to Korea, but he clearly defined the stakes of containment, when he later wrote that the invasion was, "...an open, undisguised challenge to our internationally accepted position as the protector of South Korea ... To back away from this challenge, in view of our capacity for meeting it, would be highly destructive to the power and prestige of the United States. By prestige I mean the shadow cast by power, which is of great deterrent importance. Therefore, we could not accept the conquest of this important area by a Soviet puppet under the very guns of our defensive perimeter with no more resistance than words and gestures in the Security Council. It looked as though we must steel ourselves for the use of force. That did not mean, in words later used by General Mark Clark, that we must be prepared 'to shoot the works for victory,' but rather to see that the attack failed."³⁰

The United Nations Security Council responded rapidly. On June 25, owing largely to a fortuitous boycott by the Soviet delegate, the initial resolution on the Korean hostilities was passed. (Given the very elastic use later made of them, the full text of both the June 25 and June 27 resolutions are quoted here:)

United Nations Security Council Resolution of June 25, 1950

"THE SECURITY COUNCIL,

RECALLING the finding of the General Assembly in its resolution of 21 October 1949 that the Government of the Republic of Korea is a lawfully established government 'having effective control and jurisdiction over that part of Korea where the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea was able to observe and consult and in which the great majority of the people of Korea reside; and that this Government is based on elections which were a valid expression of the free will of the electorate of that part of Korea and which were observed by the Temporary Commission; and that this is the only such Government in Korea';...

NOTING with grave concern the armed attack upon the Republic of Korea by forces from North Korea,

DETERMINES that this action constitutes a breach of the peace,

I. Calls for the immediate cessation of hostilities; and

Calls upon the authorities of North Korea to withdraw forthwith their armed forces to the thirty-eighth parallel;

II. Requests the United Nations Commission in Korea

- (a) To communicate its fully considered recommendations on the situation with the least possible delay.
- (b) To observe the withdrawal of the North Korean forces to the thirty-eight parallel; and
- (c) To keep the Security Council informed on the execution of this resolution;

III. Calls upon all members to render every assistance to the United Nations in the execution of this resolution and to refrain from giving assistance to the North Korean authorities.³¹

With the military situation deteriorating, on June 26, President Truman authorized the unrestricted commitment of U.S. air and naval power to support South Korean forces south of the 38th parallel.³² On the following day, the Security Council met again to pass a stronger measure on the Korean situation.

United Nations Security Council Resolution of June 27, 1950

"THE SECURITY COUNCIL,

HAVING DETERMINED that the armed attack upon the Republic of Korea by forces from North Korea constitutes a breach of the peace,

HAVING CALLED for an immediate cessation of hostilities, and

HAVING CALLED upon the authorities of North Korea to withdraw forthwith their armed forces to the 38th parallel, and

HAVING NOTED from the report of the United Nations Commission for Korea that the authorities in North Korea have neither ceased hostilities nor withdrawn their armed forces to the 38th parallel and that urgent military measures are required to restore international peace and security, and

HAVING NOTED the appeal from the Republic of Korea to the United Nations for immediate and effective steps to secure peace and security,

RECOMMENDS that the Members of the United Nations furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area."³³

Expanding upon the context of restoring and maintaining peace, Secretary Acheson later maintained that, "A sensible interpretation of the (June 27th) resolution would have been that after repelling the armed attack the Security Council wanted to make reasonably sure that it would not be renewed as soon as the guardians of peace withdrew."³⁴ This concept became the wedge in turning a limited "restoration" goal into realizing the much larger objective of "reunification." Acheson developed this thought in reflecting that "...in light of history, the second clause in the resolution might be construed to mean something more than the prevention of a new attack. It might include a goal of the UN resolution of

1947, 'an independent, united Korean government,' then thought a foundation, if not a prerequisite, to peace and security in the area. Behind the slogan lay a reality. The division of Korea at the 38th parallel, with the northern half in the Soviet sphere of influence and the southern half in the American, was, indeed, the chief obstacle to peace and security in the area. On the other hand, the American Government was not willing to commit its forces to the task of creating an independent and united Korea against any and all opposition.³⁵

The U. S. Government threw out a variety of early signals defining its objective as the restoration of the *status quo ante bellum*. George F. Kennan described the environment when he later wrote that, "In advocating from the outset a vigorous and determined military reaction on our part to the North Korean attack, I had in mind only the repelling of this attack and the expulsion of the North Korean forces from the area south of the 38th parallel. It never occurred to me, initially, that we would make it our purpose to go farther."³⁶ Mr. Kennan subsequently briefed the NATO ambassadors to Washington that our goal was the restoration of the *status quo ante bellum*. The June 28 National Security Council meeting further confirmed President Truman's limited aims. In his view, while "the sources of supply in North Korea should be kept under consideration, ... no U.S. attacks should be conducted across the 38th parallel under current orders."³⁷ A well-publicized speech by Secretary Acheson on June 29 informed the Newspaper Guild that our action was "solely to be for the purpose of restoring the Republic of Korea to its status prior to the invasion from the north and of reestablishing the peace broken by that aggression."³⁸ Continuing to define these limited objectives, Secretary Acheson wrote to Paul Nitze on July 10, "we have got to put in the force necessary to reoccupy to the 38th".³⁹ In his memoirs, Acheson confirms this limited goal with the observation that, "nowhere in my memorandum appears any thought of an independent and united Korea as the U.S. or UN war aim."⁴⁰

The area of operations necessary to restore the *status quo* began to evolve during the National Security Council Consultant's Meeting on the morning of June 29th. There, Kennan reported that from the State Department's perspective, it might become necessary "to permit air operations, though no ground-force occupation, north of that line in order to dislodge the communist forces from South Korea."⁴¹ Support of an expansion of air operations into North Korea solidified that afternoon with the observation of General Lindsay, the Chief of the Strategic Planning Staff that, "... that it would be desirable to destroy lines of communication and bases in North Korea. General Lindsay also indicated the current approach of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which was that our operations should be limited to South Korea in principle, but that General MacArthur should be left free to operate north of the 38th parallel if he considered it necessary to the success of his mission."⁴²

A general reluctance to dictate to any CINC was a matter of long-standing policy for the Joint Chiefs. Dictating to General MacArthur was clearly something more. General Collins later defined the JCS-CINCFE relationship when said that "General MacArthur was a much older, much more experienced man than any of us. We were relative youngsters on the JCS at that time."⁴³ The resulting instructions from JCS to MacArthur were thus carefully obscure with regard to restrictions.

On June 29, MacArthur was given a directive to consolidate, broaden and supplement his previous orders regarding South Korea and Formosa and the two UN resolutions. While limiting the employment of ground forces "to essential communications and other essential service units," the JCS authorized him to "employ such army combat and service forces as to insure the retention of a port and air base in the general area of Pusan-Chinhae." He was further "authorized to extend your operations into North Korea against air bases, depots, tank farms, troop columns and other such purely military targets, if and when, in your judgment, this becomes essential for the performance of your missions as given ... or to avoid unnecessary casualties to our forces. Special care will be taken to insure that operations in North Korea stay well clear of the frontiers of Manchuria or the Soviet Union." These instructions concluded with political guidance informing General MacArthur that,

"The decision to commit United States air and naval forces and limited army forces to provide cover and support for South Korean troops does not constitute a decision to engage in war with the Soviet Union if Soviet forces intervene in Korea. The decision regarding Korea, however, was taken in full realization of the risks involved. If Soviet forces actively oppose our operations in Korea, your forces should defend themselves, should take no action to aggravate the situation, and you should report the situation to Washington."⁴⁴

At 0500 on 30 June, President Truman authorized the commitment of American ground troops to save South Korea. His previously enunciated limited war aims flowed from a desire to prevent World War III, but the commitment of ground troops exposed a pair of worries. "The first was a military paradox: that the war could be won if, and only if, it could be contained. ... The second stemmed from the first: the military officer most likely to extend the war was MacArthur."⁴⁵

As MacArthur's role was formalized and expanded, the ability of the Administration to control him would be severely diminished. In a July 7, 1950 Resolution, the Security Council welcomed international support of the defense of the Republic of Korea against armed attack, and recommended that members contributing forces make them available to a "unified command under the United States, ... (The UN further requested that the United States) designate the commander of such forces."⁴⁶ MacArthur's reputation as a difficult subordinate was well known, and generally acknowledged. When he became aware of the UN request, John Foster Dulles wrote to Secretary Acheson that,

"I assume that General MacArthur would be designated. In view of the extreme delicacy of the present situation; the importance of preventing the Korean fighting from developing into a world war; the importance of maintaining the confidence of the other members of the Security Council that their resolutions will be scrupulously complied with; and in view of the factors which you and I discussed with the President, I suggest that the President might want to emphasize by personal message to General MacArthur the delicate nature of the responsibilities which he will now be carrying, not only on behalf of the United

States but on behalf of the United Nations and the importance of instructing his staff to comply scrupulously with political and military limitations and instructions which may be sent, the reasons for which may not always be immediately apparent but which will often have behind them political considerations of gravity.”⁴⁷

“On 10 July at the request of the United Nations, President Truman directed General MacArthur to establish the United Nations Command (UNC) for purposes of operations against the North Korean invaders. From that point, General MacArthur, as CINCFE, supported the operations of the UNC, which he commanded as CINCUNC. His primary responsibility as CINCFE remained the defense of Japan...”⁴⁸

The case has often been made that the “United Nations’ call for the restoration of peace and security in the area, was generally considered sufficient legal basis to enter North Korea,”⁴⁹ That position stretches credulity, the text of the resolutions, and the positions of our allies in the United Nations. Indeed, even given the gift of fifty years of hindsight, an exceedingly elastic interpretation of the text of the UN resolutions is required to make such a case.

America’s major allies had much narrower initial goals in mind. Despite a passing discussion of unification during House of Commons debate on July 5,⁵⁰ the British were generally cautious. Our Ambassador to Moscow reported in early July that, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko had asked British Ambassador Sir David Kelly whether he had any specific proposal for a peaceful settlement, and that Kelly had replied, “The status quo ante.” Ambassador Kirk urged that we make it clear to the British ... that a prerequisite for peaceful settlement was complete compliance by North Korea with the Security Council’s call for a cease-fire and withdrawal of the invading forces north of the 38th parallel.⁵¹ Soviet attempts to make Korea a bargaining chip in negotiations over larger issues muddied the diplomatic waters but were firmly rebuffed. British Foreign Minister Bevin wrote to Acheson that he believed the USSR wished to restore the status quo ante but would probably require a US change of position vis-à-vis Formosa as a quid-pro-quo.⁵² In the domestic political climate of 1950, such a proposition was clearly unacceptable. Secretary Acheson replied to Foreign Minister Bevin on July 10 that there would be no trade of Formosa for the withdrawal of North Korean forces from South Korea. He further stated that, “...our policy aimed at as early and complete a liquidation of the Korean aggression as was militarily possible, without concessions that would whet Communist appetites and bring on other aggressions elsewhere.”⁵³ A subsequent Indian proposal that made the seating of the People’s Republic of China in the UN a quid-pro-quo for USSR-PRC suasion against North Korea for withdrawal from and reunification of Korea was equally unpalatable.⁵⁴

A LARGER OBJECTIVE EMERGES

With a variety of policy and position papers in development and circulation within the Administration, an orderly process was required. President Truman accordingly directed on July 6th that “all proposals for presidential action in the current Korean crisis must be forwarded to him through the

machinery of the National Security Council.⁵⁵ The NSC properly became a central clearinghouse for policy. In an unfortunate, albeit natural, consequence of this process, individual voices were diluted in the resulting quest for consensus.

President Truman's administrative assistant set the stage for subsequent decisions with a July 12th memo to the Executive Secretary of the NSC. "To the best of my knowledge, no decision has been made with respect to the action to be taken by United Nations forces after the North Koreans have been driven back to the 38th parallel. ... It seems to me that this matter should be considered at a very early date by the United States Government, and that we should press for the United Nations' answer to this question."⁵⁶ With this, the allure of a larger prize began to affect policy formulation, incrementally at first, and ultimately irresistibly.

Korea President "Syngman Rhee was responsible for bringing the question to the forefront of international attention on July 13. The North Korean attack had, he said, 'obliterated the 38th Parallel and ...no peace and order could be maintained in Korea as long as the division at the 38th Parallel remained.' This prompted a denial from an 'American army spokesman' who declared that the United States intervened solely to push the North Koreans back across the line and would 'use force if necessary' to prevent Rhee's troops from advancing beyond the parallel. On that same day, however, Truman made it clear to the press that the question of crossing the parallel was an open one which he would decide when it became necessary to do so."⁵⁷

Chairman Bradley describes the division of thinking on July 17 in response to President Truman's question to the NSC about how to wind up the war. "The State Department was divided in its views. Its two foremost Soviet experts, George Kennan and Charles (Chip) Bohlen, urged utmost restraint. They were opposed to crossing the 38th parallel. Their views strongly influenced State's policy planning staff, headed by Paul Nitze, which on July 23 produced a position paper recommending that the United States 'should make every effort to restrict military ground action to the area south of the 38th parallel.' The reason? 'It is extremely unlikely that the Kremlin would accept the establishment in North Korea of a regime which it could not dominate and control.' As our troops approached the 38th parallel, the paper stated, 'the danger of conflict with Chinese Communists or Soviet forces would be greatly increased.' The risks of bringing on such a conflict 'appear to outweigh the political advantages that might be gained.'"⁵⁸

The Department of Defense and Joint Staff were also beginning to plan ahead. As Army Chief of Staff Collins recorded, "In mid-July 1950 on the recommendation of General Bolte, I had suggested to the JCS that a study be initiated by the Joint Strategic Survey Committee in anticipation of the National Security Council's paper. Meanwhile, the Intelligence Division of the Army General Staff was already working on a study of its own, as was the Central Intelligence Agency. Information contained in these studies was made available to the JCS."⁵⁹

The National Security Council, as the focus of policy formulation and coordination, attempted to resolve these divergent views. The Defense Department joined Secretary Acheson and Assistant

Secretary Rusk to advocate a hawkish position. The voices of restraint, centered in Kennan and Bohlen, were few, isolated, and of declining influence.

George F. Kennan noted in his diary on July 21, 1950 a conversation with two staff members who were concerned that "we were not making clear our determination to stop at the 38th parallel in Korea."⁶⁰ At this point, the PPS Draft Memorandum (as of 22 July) was intended to decide "upon U.S. policy regarding the advance beyond the 38th parallel of U.S. forces now engaged in Korea as a part of the U.N. forces." The draft document acknowledged that the "primary purpose of the present military action in Korea is to bring about the cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of the North Korean forces to the 38th parallel," under the provisions of Chapter VII of the UN charter. It went on to parse the issue into two parts: "(a) the long-term effort to bring about unity and independence, and (b) the present enforcement action to repel North Korean aggression." Complexity was introduced in the statement of strategic context, which understood that there was "ample evidence of the strategic importance to Russia of the Korean peninsula. It is extremely unlikely that the Kremlin would accept the establishment in North Korea of a regime which it could not dominate and control. When it becomes apparent that the North Korean aggression will be defeated, there might be some agreement between the U.S.S.R. and the North Korean regime which would mean in substance that U.N. military action north of the 38th parallel would result in conflict with the U.S.S.R. or Communist China."⁶¹ The paper came to the conclusion that if "... U.N. forces were to continue military ground action north of the 38th parallel except to the extent essential for tactical requirements as fighting approaches that line, the danger of conflict with Chinese communist or Soviet forces would be greatly increased" and from "the point of view of U.S. military commitments and strength, we should make every effort to restrict military ground action to the area south of the 38th parallel." The draft foresaw difficulties in the UN and noted that "U.N. military action north of the 38th parallel, except to the extent essential for tactical requirements as fighting approaches that line, would require a new Security Council resolution. Such new resolution might be difficult to obtain." Only in the event of an unexpected collapse of the North Korean Army, a subsequent Chinese or Soviet failure to fill the resulting vacuum, and only with another United Nations Security Council resolution should we pursue military operations in the north to achieve a unified and independent Korea.

In the prevailing environment of uncertainty, policy-makers grasped the opportunity to defer decisions. During a July 28 meeting in the office of Under Secretary of State Webb, "Mr. Nitze explained that the substance of the recommendations in this paper was that we should wait until the time comes when our troops approach the 38th parallel before deciding whether to cross it or not."⁶² This meeting also debated the relative merit of using "attack" rather than "aggression," in order to avoid any implication of North Korea's existence as a state and highlighted the attendant difficulty of a public affairs campaign. The meeting further accepted the assumption that U.S. public and congressional opinion would no longer be satisfied with the mere restoration of the status quo ante, but was unwilling to underwrite the elimination of 38th parallel as a war objective.

The aggressive posture of the Defense Department with regard to the parallel merged with the glimmering opportunity to go beyond Containment and to actually push back the frontiers of Communism. This sharpened in a draft memorandum dated July 31st, which pointed out that, "No action of the Security Council has yet specifically limited military ground operations of the unified command to the area south of the 38th parallel. ... the 38th parallel has no more significance than any other (sic) meridian. ... A return to the status quo ante bellum would not promise security. ... The 38th parallel is a geographical artificiality violating the natural integrity of a singularly homogeneous nation. It began as a temporary military convenience; it became the eastern outpost of the iron curtain. ... The situation in Korea now provides the United States and the free world with the first opportunity to displace part of the Soviet orbit. If the basic policy of the United States is to reduce the preponderant power of the USSR in Asia and elsewhere, then UN operations in Korea can set the stage for the non-communist penetration into an area of Soviet influence."⁶³ This draft broadened our defined objectives to include seeking to occupy Korea and defeat NK wherever found, recommending that CG UNC should be directed to "take necessary military action in Korea, without regard to the 38th parallel."⁶⁴

By 31 July Pentagon planners recommended that the UN Supreme Commander should be, "directed to cross the parallel, defeat the enemy's forces, and occupy the country, provided the following assumptions held:

- (1) That the United States would mobilize sufficient resources to attain the objective and strengthen the military position in all other areas of strategic importance.
- (2) That the Soviet Union would not intervene in Korea or elsewhere.
- (3) That the President would proclaim, the Congress endorse, and the United Nations adopt as our war aim a united, free, and independent Korea, and that the United States and other nations would maintain their troops in Korea under the UN Command as occupying forces as long as needed."⁶⁵

The breadth of their assumptions prompted acerbic remarks from Secretary Acheson, which all military planners might take to heart. He wrote that, "I have long noticed that military recommendations are usually premised upon the meticulous statement of assumptions that as often as not are quite contrary to the facts and yet control the conclusions."⁶⁶ The planners took for granted that the military situation would ultimately be reversed in our favor, yet for all the assumptions and contingencies in their plans, they failed to produce an adequate review of options in view of that anticipated success. Kennan's caution to the Secretary of State on August 8 that, "... when the tide of battle begins to change, ... (w)hen we begin to have military success, that will be the time to watch out. Anything may then happen -- entry of Soviet forces, entry of Chinese Communist forces, new strike for U.N. settlement, or all three together,"⁶⁷ did not take root.

With a resurgence of military confidence, a more bellicose public position emerged. Ambassador Austin floated a trial balloon at the United Nations during a 17th August speech, when he

stated that, "The Security Council has set as its first objective the end of the breach of the peace. This objective must be pursued in such a manner that no opportunity is provided for another attempt at invasion. ... The United Nations must see that the people of Korea attain complete individual and political freedom. ... Shall only a part of the country be assured this freedom? ... I think not. ... The General Assembly has decided that fair and free elections should be held throughout the whole of the Korean peninsula."⁶⁸

Secretary Acheson returned from a brief vacation on August 21, to find two conflicting views running through his department. "One was that under no circumstances should General MacArthur's forces cross the 38th parallel. The other denied this and advocated (or some proponents did) going wherever necessary to destroy the invader's force and restore security in the area. The latter view seemed the right one if properly restricted. Troops could not be expected ... to march up to a surveyor's line and stop."⁶⁹ To further complicate Acheson's situation, a Kennan memo pointed out the hazards posed by an unrestrained CINCFE. He cautioned that in "permitting General MacArthur to retain the wide and relatively uncontrolled latitude he has enjoyed in determining our policy in the north Asian and western Pacific areas, we are tolerating a state of affairs in which we do not really have full control over the statements that are being made – and the actions taken – in our name."⁷⁰

The State Department floated the broadened objective among our allies during August 30 meetings with the British and French preliminary to planned Foreign Minister's Meetings. The American position split the issue into two questions: (1) the present enforcement actions, and (2) long-term objectives for Korea. "These questions would become particularly acute when the North Korean forces were driven back to the 38th Parallel, and the U.S. believed that continued military action would depend upon prior decision by the U.N."⁷¹ In an interesting paraphrase, which distilled the essence of the then-in-draft NSC-81, we advised the British and French that:

"The U.S. proposed the following course of action as U.N. forces approach the 38th Parallel:

- (1) Constant assessment of the situation should be made and continued consultation held with U.N. members to seek general agreement to the course of operations;
- (2) If Soviet forces occupy North Korea to the 38th Parallel, U.N. forces should not cross the Parallel unless ordered by the U.N.;
- (3) If major Soviet or Chinese Communist combat units engage or clearly indicate their intention of engaging in hostilities, the question of further action should be referred to the Security Council."⁷²

The French delegation maintained that U.N. forces should not cross north of the 38th as this "would create a new situation" and the British "doubted whether crossing of the 38th parallel could be justified under the resolution of June 27, 1950, as this resolution was aimed at repelling attack. Crossing the Parallel, or establishing a permanent occupation of North Korea would be another matter requiring further decision by the Security Council." The British further suggested that "one way of clarifying U.N.

objectives might be a resolution of the GA that as soon as the situation permits, all previous U.N. resolutions with respect to Korea should be implemented.... Such a resolution need not commit us to the view that the 38th Parallel should be crossed – this decision could be made at a later date – but it would emphasize our desire to unify Korea on a democratic basis.”⁷³

General MacArthur, whether or not aware of these deliberations, was certainly unfettered by them. His intentions were neither as vague nor as cautious as his superiors’. To him the issue was clear-cut. During a mid-July meeting with Generals Collins and Vandenberg, MacArthur stated that, “I intend to destroy and not to drive back the North Korean forces. ... I may need to occupy all of North Korea. In the aftermath of operations the problem is to compose and unite Korea.”⁷⁴ Reporting on a mid-August meeting with MacArthur and Admiral Sherman, General Collins wrote, “We agreed with the General that he should be authorized to continue the (post Inch’on) attack across the 38th Parallel to destroy the North Korean forces, which otherwise would be a recurrent threat to the independence of South Korea.”⁷⁵

These disparate ideas, positions, and papers coalesced into the draft NSC-81. “The recommendations in this paper were necessarily tentative and subject to modification after consultation with other UN members. The drafters of NSC-81 concluded that the Security Council resolutions of June and July provided a legal basis for military operations north of the 38th parallel for a strictly limited purpose: ‘to compel the withdrawal of the North Korean forces behind the line or to defeat these forces.’”⁷⁶ The paper was formally reviewed and, “On September 1 the departments had agreed through the National Security Council upon a policy recommendation dealing solely with military operations to carry out the narrow interpretation of the June 27 resolution. This concluded that the resolution was sufficient to authorize military operations north as well as south of the parallel to repel the invasion and defeat the invaders and that General MacArthur should be authorized to conduct them, provided that neither the Russians nor the (Chinese) Communists entered the conflict or announced their intention of doing so.”⁷⁷

Omar Bradley later described NSC-81 as “a masterpiece of obfuscation, designed, I believe, as much to reconcile the conflicting views in State as to provide the President with clear-cut options.”⁷⁸ The Army Chief of Staff described it as “curiously contradictory.”⁷⁹ NSC-81 received a “cold review by the JCS.”⁸⁰ The Chiefs “felt that General MacArthur’s mission required the destruction of the NK forces and that no prior restrictions should be placed on his crossing the 38th Parallel if it became necessary to do so in order to continue his mission. The chief contra argument that we considered was that an extension of operations to the north would provide additional excuse for Soviet recalcitrance in the United Nations and could lead to the active intervention of the Soviets or the Chinese Communists. We anticipated, however, that the main strength of the NK Army would be broken in South Korea and that operations north of the Parallel would be chiefly of a mopping-up nature, which should be conducted by South Korean troops.”⁸¹ General Collins further elaborated on this interpretation twenty-five years later when he said, “The Joint Chiefs felt that if we were required to stop at the 38th Parallel, nothing would have been done to solve the real problem. ... The 38th Parallel had no defensive merit whatsoever: therefore, General MacArthur

recommended that he be permitted to go on. The Joint Chiefs supported his recommendation that we continue the attack, at least to the point where a good defensive line could be held.⁸² Sadly, if such detailed thinking was indeed prevalent in Washington, the caveats restricting advance to a better defensive line and the use of only South Korean forces for mopping-up north of the 38th parallel were never clearly enunciated to CINCUNC.

The intent of our policy was rapidly obscured when unification was enunciated as a political goal, though not necessarily as a military objective. In a September 1st speech, President Truman said, "We believe the Koreans have a right to be free, independent, and united - as they want to be. ... Under the direction and guidance of the United Nations, we, with others, will do our part to help them enjoy that right."⁸³ Unfortunately, the implied distinction between political goals and military objectives was not made clear short of the retrospective memoirs of the various participants.

The JCS considered the basic approach of the draft NSC-81 to be "unrealistic since that approach envisages the stabilization of the front on the 38th parallel."⁸⁴ They argued on September 7th that after the anticipated destruction of North Korean forces south of the 38th parallel, ground operations must be conducted both north and south of the parallel. The JCS further proposed that only South Korean forces should be used in the north and anticipated that the only remaining North Korean capability would be "of a guerilla character." They optimistically announced their agreement with MacArthur on the limitation of occupation to the principal cities of the south, leading to an early termination of UN occupation.

The NSC formally considered the redrafted (and renumbered) NCS-81/1 on September 11 when it was presented to the President. The final paper sought "to determine what United States course of action with respect to Korea would be best calculated to advance the national interests of the United States."⁸⁵ It was full of equivocation, rife with political misjudgment, based upon specious assumptions, and wrapped in obscure logic. Despite a significant discussion of Soviet and Communist Chinese options, Acheson would later write that the paper dealt with strictly military issues. In short, NSC-81/1 was founded in a narrow interpretation of the UN's June 27th resolution and concluded that the resolution "was sufficient to authorize military operations north as well as south of the parallel to repel the invasion and defeat the invaders and that General MacArthur should be authorized to conduct them."⁸⁶ As presented to President Truman, NSC-81/1 accounted for a wide variety of contingencies, but failed to properly frame the most difficult and potentially dangerous issue: that by achieving our initial objectives of restoring the 38th parallel and (largely) destroying the North Korean army, we would face a discrete decision to proceed into the north.

After a brief summary analyzing the background, the paper reiterated that, "the political objective of the United States in Korea is to bring about the complete independence and unity of Korea in accordance with the General Assembly resolutions of November 14, 1947, December 12, 1948, and October 21, 1949."⁸⁷ It broke new policy ground when it went on enunciate a potential larger military goal. "If the present United Nations action in Korea can accomplish this political objective without substantially

increasing the risk of general war with the Soviet Union or Communist China, it would be in our interest to advocate the pressing of the United Nations action to this conclusion.”⁸⁸ At least to JCS Chairman Bradley, this “... reflected a drastic change in our concept of the Korean War ... we had broadened our war aims to include complete destruction of the North Korean Army and the political unification of the country.”⁸⁹

In an effort to gather and sustain international political support for military action, the paper noted “the advantage of establishing a record that will clearly show that every reasonable effort has been made to avoid carrying the military struggle into a new phase by a land offensive beyond the 38th parallel.”⁹⁰ Returning to safer ground, a foundation for operational issues was laid. “The U. N. forces are clearly committed by the Security Council resolutions to compel the withdrawal of the North Korean forces behind the 38th parallel and there is a clear legal basis for taking such military actions north of the 38th parallel as are necessary in accomplishing this mission.”⁹¹ The paper accepted that a UN mandate to achieve the strategic goal of unifying Korea through military operations was not in hand, and that an additional license from the UN would be required to achieve the political goal. “Military actions north of the 38th parallel which go beyond the accomplishment of this mission ... are not clearly authorized by existing Security Council resolutions. Accordingly, United Nations approval for military actions in furtherance of this political objective is a prerequisite to their initiation.”⁹² There was, however, a stark absence of discussion on the advisability of such a course of action. For all of its caveats with respect to possible Sino-Soviet reaction, the planners only dealt with the alternative of a Sino-Soviet military response (or a clear signal of such a response) prior to UN forces crossing the parallel. There was no discussion of a potential reaction by China or the USSR after the fact of a UN crossing into North Korea. The policy-makers had missed or avoided discussion of a key point. “The question was not whether the American desire to reunite Korea under non-Communist rule was a proper goal for the United States, but whether the Communist world could sit by as the United States in their turn ruptured the [new] status quo.”⁹³

The paper recommended an authorization for planning for the possible occupation of North Korea, but specified that no execution of these plans was to occur without the explicit approval of the President. In reviewing the contingencies of Soviet or Chinese involvement, NSC-81/1 recommended an immediate referral to the UN Security Council with a call for cooperation in achieving Korean independence and unity. The paper acknowledged that such Sino-Soviet “... cooperation would not be forthcoming,”⁹⁴ and recommended the subsequent pursuit of the condemnation of the Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China as offenders in the General Assembly.

After continuing a numbing discursive on the alternative courses of action of China and/or the Soviets, the paper discussed preparation for an eventual retreat or sudden collapse by the North Koreans and the offering of peace terms in such an event. The offering of surrender terms was considered as a vehicle to “develop support for action north of the 38th parallel to accomplish the political objective of the United Nations in Korea in the event that the terms are rejected.”⁹⁵ The terms subsequently offered would

be impossible for an unconquered nation to accept. As drafted by the State Department they were a fig leaf. As refined and promulgated by General MacArthur their intent becomes transparent.

A key conclusion of NSC-81/1 was that "final decisions cannot be made at this time."⁹⁶ While the military axiom that "the path of least resistance is always mined" may not always be true, it was in this case. The delay of implementing actions after President Truman's September 11th signing would effectively preclude further consideration of the deferred decisions. The forwarding of instructions to MacArthur was delayed by the departure of Secretary of Defense Johnson. The same day that he signed NSC-81/1, Truman acted on an earlier decision to seek Secretary Johnson's resignation. After an abortive attempt to retain his position, Johnson agreed to leave office effective September 19.⁹⁷ While the JCS provided MacArthur a summary of NSC-81/1 on September 15, in the vacuum of Johnson's impending departure, "no instructions were sent to the JCS to prepare an implementing directive...".⁹⁸

Unaware of the details of American thought, the British remained concerned. On the same day NSC-81/1 was approved, the Charge in the United Kingdom tersely reported that from the British Cabinet's position, a "source of danger lies in state of aroused US public opinion, and unpredictability of MacArthur's actions." The British Cabinet was confident that the US administration intended to limit the Korean action to a "localized affair," but was very anxious about the ability of the administration to withstand public pressure and, more significantly, to limit and control General MacArthur.⁹⁹

Concurrent with these political and policy determinations, General MacArthur had been planning the amphibious assault at Inch'on. The brilliance of his strategic inception was paralleled in the brilliant tactical execution by a Navy-Marine Corps team. But flawed operational planning, exacerbated by a complicated command and control, led to a failure to contain and destroy North Korean forces south of the 38th parallel after the amphibious landings.¹⁰⁰ The North Korean army was damaged. It was not destroyed. Significant forces were permitted to retreat north. The case for ground operations north of the 38th parallel was strengthened, almost to the point of inevitability. This, in turn, would further fuel the argument for operations leading to the unification of Korea by force. General MacArthur defined the prevailing situation when he wrote that when, after Inch'on,

"... no diplomatic action looking toward peace seemed to be forthcoming, diverse views began to appear among the members of the United Nations. The United States took the position that if the North Korean Army was not completely destroyed, and peace and order restored in the northern half of the peninsula, South Korea would live indefinitely beneath the threat of renewed Communist aggression. Many others, led by the British, were opposed to sending United Nations Forces into North Korea. Their argument seemed to be that more could be accomplished in Asia by appeasement than by moral resolution. ... A worldwide public debate erupted (over) whether or not United Nations troops should cross the 38th Parallel to mop up the shattered remains of the armed forces of North Korea. If not, would North Korea, behind the sanctuary of the 38th Parallel, be permitted to organize, train, and equip another army ready for battle."¹⁰¹

Depending upon one's initial perception, MacArthur's success at Inch'on either restored or further enhanced his reputation. In either case, success made him virtually unassailable and hence uncontrollable by Washington. As Army Chief of Staff Collins observed, the "... success of Inchon was so great, and the subsequent prestige of General MacArthur was so overpowering, that the Chiefs hesitated thereafter to question later plans and decisions of the general, which should have been challenged. In this we must share with General MacArthur some of the responsibility for actions that led to defeats in North Korea."¹⁰²

THE DECISION TO CROSS THE PARALLEL

NSC-81/1's deferral of the ultimate decision on crossing the parallel was conveyed to General MacArthur in the advance information provided to him. This "... made it plain that he would not cross the 38th Parallel without specific authority from the President."¹⁰³ After the delays occasioned (or rationalized) by Secretary Johnson's departure, on September 25 General Bradley finally forwarded a draft directive for future United Nations Command operations to the new Secretary of Defense, George C. Marshall. "The proposed order dealt chiefly with military matters ... After several days of waiting, during which the Army staff fretted over the delay in getting definite instructions to General MacArthur, the State Department added to the JCS draft some instructions on the return of Seoul to the ROK government of Syngman Rhee. Because of the importance of this directive General Marshall secured the approval of the President."¹⁰⁴ The new guidance was transmitted to General MacArthur on September 27.

This guidance was subject to interpretation, too much of it occurring after the fact. MacArthur's own after-the-fact interpretation is revealing. His selective version (below) is supplemented in bold by the official history's version. An otherwise undocumented insertion is {bracketed}.

"Your military objective is the destruction of the North Korean armed forces. In attaining this objective, you are authorized to conduct military operations **including amphibious and airborne landings or ground operations** north of the 38th parallel in Korea **provided that at the time of such operations there has been no entry into North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese Communist Forces, no announcement of intended entry, nor a threat to counter our operations militarily in North Korea.** Under no circumstances, however, will your forces, {ground, air or sea,} cross the Manchurian or USSR borders of Korea, and, as a matter of policy, no non-Korean ground forces will be used in the North East provinces bordering the Soviet Union, or in the areas along the Manchurian border. Furthermore, support of your operations, north or south of the 38th parallel, will not include air or naval action against Manchuria or against U.S.S.R. territory. [...] When organized armed resistance by the North Korean Forces has been brought substantially to an end, you should direct the R.O.K. forces to take the lead in disarming remaining North Korean units and enforcing the terms of surrender. **Guerilla activities should be dealt with primarily by the forces of the Republic of Korea, with minimum participation by United Nations contingents.** Circumstances obtaining at

the time will determine the character of and necessity for occupation of North Korea. Your plans for such an occupation will be forwarded for approval to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. You will also submit your plan for future operations north of the 38th Parallel to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for approval.¹⁰⁵

MacArthur's plans, as submitted in compliance with this directive, called for land attacks by the Eighth Army to link with an amphibious assault at Wonson by X Corps. These plans assured the JCS that "R.O.K. Army forces only will conduct operations north of the line Chungjo-Yongwon-Hungnan."¹⁰⁶ On the recommendation of both the Secretaries of State and Defense, President Truman approved General MacArthur's plan. In Secretary Acheson's words, "The plan seemed excellently contrived to create a strong military position from which to exploit the possibilities of North Korean defeat – either to insure the South a strong defensive line against a renewal of the attack or, if the South Koreans were strong enough and the Chinese did not intervene, to move toward the UN goal of a united, free, and independent Korea."¹⁰⁷

The restrictions in these orders were diluted very shortly thereafter. When news reports averred that General Walker had announced his intention to stop at the 38th Parallel awaiting further instructions, Secretary of Defense Marshall sent an "eyes only" message to General MacArthur, discussing UN political issues and advising CINUNC that "We want you to feel unhampered tactically and strategically to proceed north of the 38th Parallel."¹⁰⁸ MacArthur signaled his understanding, and perhaps his intentions, when he replied, "Unless and until the enemy capitulates, I regard all Korea as open to military operations."¹⁰⁹ With such an unquestioned exchange on the record, the restrictions became anything but restrictive. The Truman Administration's sensitivity to the parallel was further undermined in the reaction to MacArthur's submission of a draft directive for the Eighth Army to JCS review about October 2nd. The plan highlighted a pause at the parallel, and caused Secretary Marshall to signal that, "We desire you to proceed with your operations without any further explanation or announcement and let action determine the matter. Our government desires to avoid having to make an issue of the 38th Parallel until we have accomplished our mission."¹¹⁰ Events rapidly attained momentum. The long-deferred decision became a decision of confirmation rather than a decision of control. The opportunity to limit the war to restoration of the *status quo ante bellum* slipped away as ROK forces crossed the border 01 October. This provoked a vocal response from China – both directly and through the Indian Government. In the prevailing climate, these signals were ignored. In retrospect, it became apparent that "China made the crossing a *causus belli*, whereas the United States saw the movement north as a unique opportunity to diminish the size of the Communist Bloc and as a way of probing Soviet and Chinese intentions."¹¹¹ Their intentions would become clear soon enough.

The military crossing was licensed by the United Nations in an October 7th resolution, attributed to Secretary Acheson but presented by the United Kingdom and seven other nations. "Without mentioning the 38th Parallel, the resolution recommended that:

- (a) All appropriate steps be taken to ensure conditions of stability throughout Korea, and
- (b) All constituent acts be taken, including the holding of elections, under the auspices of the United Nations, for the establishment of a unified, independent, and democratic government in the sovereign state of Korea.”¹¹²

The extent of General MacArthur's remit would become an issue only in retrospect. When the General Assembly voted 47-5 for the October 7th resolution, in General Collin's later words there "... remained no question but that the U.N. General Assembly, President Truman, the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense, and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff all had approved the crossing of the 38th Parallel. Most of the questions concerning the wisdom of this decision came after the event."¹¹³ The American Eighth Army crossed the 38th Parallel on October 9. Initial success was applauded, and masked deeper concerns. Even the previously cautious French Government climbed on board. "The crossing of the 38th Parallel, after Foreign Minister Schuman had declared September 6 that France would prefer restoration of the *status quo ante*, gave rise to no complaints at the time since the troops of the United Nations were moving forward in the flush of victory."¹¹⁴ The flush of victory led to the inevitable promises that the troops would be home for Christmas, but faded with the disastrous entry of Chinese forces. "It had taken only ninety days to restore the *status quo ante bellum*. The Communist challenge had been hurled back with stunning speed. Unfortunately, however, the very brilliance of MacArthur's victory blinded both him and the United Nations to the fact that Communist China was not bluffing."¹¹⁵ Their subsequent entry shifted the balance and greatly prolonged the duration of a war already changed in character by the UN crossing of the 38th Parallel.

The United States had "backed into a limited war in Korea, because the kind of doctrine about limited war ... not only did not then exist but would have been utterly incomprehensible."¹¹⁶ In entering such unfamiliar territory, it would be well had responsible authorities provided clearly articulated direction, with sharply defined restraints. Instead, a confused chain of command, an imperial CinC, ill-defined responsibilities, changing administration goals, domestic political pressures, ambiguous UN resolutions, and ill-timed/deferred decisions created an environment wherein control was ceded to the UN CINC. His aggressive pursuit to the Yalu precipitated a much broadened and longer war.

All the consequences of our Korean decision making were not military. The immediate demands of short-term goals also led to compromising on the long-term political role of the United Nations, with serious effect into the 1960's and beyond when nations emerging from colonialism would align against the United States. The culmination of North Korea's attack opened a tempting option to reunite Korea, but the impending return of Malik and his Soviet veto to the Security Council drove our State Department to seek other legitimizing options. In his "Uniting for Peace" speech of 20 September, Secretary Acheson hoped to open the opportunity to make use of the General Assembly, in light of the certain deadlock the Soviet veto would bring. As he later described, "... we had asked the British Foreign Office its views on a proposal to turn to the General Assembly in cases of aggression should the Security Council be

paralyzed by a veto. The response was a cool one. The Foreign Office wisely forecast the dangers of the idea in the future if the then majority in the United Nations should give way to one holding contrary views. But present difficulties outweighed possible future ones, and we pressed on.¹¹⁷

Secretary Acheson offered his postmortem perspective on limited war. "Such a war policy requires quite as much determination as any other kind. It also calls for restraint and fine judgment, a sure sense of how far is far enough; it may involve, as it did in Korea, a great deal of frustration. In its execution, this policy invited dissent and criticism both from those who are afraid that the balance is being tipped against the possibility of keeping the war limited and from those who fear that keeping it limited precludes the possibility of victory and who believe that 'there is no substitute for victory.'"¹¹⁸

IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

This cautionary tale offers no solutions to the problem of defining a desired military end state and matching that end state with a desired, achievable political objective. Indeed, none is intended. What is intended, however, is a reaffirmation of the need to define the costs and consequences of committing military forces, and to clearly establish the political objective and its attendant constraints and restraints as part of the entering argument. If a changing situation demands a changed response, the resulting change must be made consciously. Strangely, the demand for such clear definition flows out of the absence of a clear and present threat to America's interests. In the absence of clearly defined threats, we "enjoy" a security surplus, which can, and has, emboldened the commitment of military forces to situations not requiring military force. This, in itself, is not harmful. When it engenders an ad hoc expansion of the original mission, however, it is fraught with danger.

The emergence and pursuit of larger goals, apparently achievable through military means and/or just a little more perseverance , can end in disaster, frustration, or national embarrassment. Mark Twain captured the essence of this trap in 1876. During a midnight graveyard dig for treasure, Tom Sawyer encouraged Huck Finn with the observation that "there were so many cases where people had given up a treasure after getting down within six inches of it, and then somebody else had come along and turned it up with a single thrust of the shovel."¹¹⁹ Americans are not quitters, but this character trait has both positive and negative implications. In political-military affairs, once troops are committed, results are expected, if not demanded. The perseverance to dig that extra six inches requires extended presence. Extended presence equates to larger exposure, and exposure is exacerbated in the absence of clearly defined, clearly restrained military tasks.

Collectively, Americans are restless, noble, and notoriously difficult to satisfy. Uniquely, we fight to restore a status quo ante, yet we have been largely disappointed with the results of each of the major wars of the 20th Century. From our perspective, World War I led to World War II. World War II led to the Cold War. Korea left us with a long-term commitment of forces, while Vietnam left us with psychic scars. The brief 1991 Gulf War left us militarily victorious, in possession of our stated military and political objectives, and the unrivalled military power on the globe. It also left us a decade-long debate, an

unstable region in the Arabian Gulf, upwardly spiraling oil prices, and an increasingly troublesome Iraqi leader. Among our lesser interventions, the picture isn't much brighter. U.S. Marines deployed to Lebanon in the early 1980's as the ante for a seat at the Middle East policy table. That ended in disaster. Our engagement in Somalia extended beyond the achievement of the original mission and permitted the humanitarian mission to mutate into nation-building. That ended in disaster. A long-term effort to restore democracy in Haiti failed quietly. That cost only money.

Each of these lessons should join with the Korean example to highlight the risks inherent to our current National Security Strategy. None of these lessons appear to have affected a strategy which advances three notional core objectives; "to enhance America's security, to bolster America's economic prosperity, and to promote democracy abroad. Central to the President's strategy for achieving these aims is U.S. engagement and leadership in world affairs."¹²⁰ The National Security Strategy recognizes that since "... there are always many demands for U.S. action, our national interests must be clear."¹²¹ As homage to clarity, these interests are sorted into three broad categories by their nominal intensity as vital interests, important national interests, and humanitarian and other interests. Threats to these interests are ultimately addressed through a strategy of engagement.

Within the triumvirate of Ends, Ways, and Means, engagement has become the favored Way. As it verges upon promotion to the status of an End, engagement is rationalized through the observation that we "... must lead abroad if we are to be secure at home. We cannot lead abroad unless we devote the necessary resources to military, diplomatic, intelligence, and other efforts. ... The international community is at times reluctant to act without American leadership. In some instances, the United States is the only nation capable of responding to shared challenges."¹²²

It is in keeping with our character as Americans that we will continue to engage in humanitarian relief and other military operations in areas of no intrinsic military, political, or economic significance. As President Clinton states, in "...some circumstances our nation may act because our values demand it."¹²³ But it is thus all the more necessary for policy makers and planners to remain ever conscious of the attendant risks of exposure and the ever-present potential for unintended escalation when military forces are introduced as the solution to any perceived political problem.

The pristine clarity of total victory departed, if it ever existed, with the Japanese surrender in September 1945. Future planners and policy makers must accept that the "New World Order" presents a much more complex contemporary environment, and so drives a sharper requirement to define, articulate, and delimit their objectives with care. George F. Kennan offered a clear definition of the paradigm shift required to clarify limited objective (or limited war) thinking after the relief of General MacArthur.

"It was asserted not long ago by a prominent American that 'war's very object is victory' and that 'in war there can be no substitute for victory.' Perhaps the confusion here lies in what is meant by the term 'victory.' Perhaps the term is actually misplaced. Perhaps there can be such a thing as 'victory' in a battle, whereas in war there can only be the

achievement or nonachievement of your objectives. In the old days, wartime objectives were generally limited and practical ones, and it was common to measure the success of your military operations by the extent to which they brought you closer to your objectives. But where your objectives are moral and ideological ones and run to changing the attitudes of an entire people or the personality of a regime, then victory is probably something not to be achieved entirely by military means or indeed in any short space of time at all; and perhaps that is the source of our confusion.”¹²⁴

Failure to resolve such confusion will lead to future mistakes. Failure to recognize that policy drift in Washington can create inexorable momentum in the field will only lengthen our list of frustrations. Will a writer forty years hence cite Kosovo as the next example? Is it too early to see where our commitment to the Balkans road will lead us? We set out in Kosovo to halt the “ethnic cleansing” of Kosovar-Albanians. That has largely been accomplished. Many of those who abused their power are being brought to task. We have restored something of the status quo, and perhaps improved upon it. But in our restless quest for a better world, we have remained engaged long enough to become part of the problem. The current NATO mandate is clouded. The continuing mission of the troops on the ground will require modification. When the expectations of the locals are not met, troops can and will become the focus of their frustration. And all the while, momentum is building for the establishment of a sovereign and independent Kosovo. Are we prepared to make a conscious decision? It is difficult to imagine the incumbent administration further risking its legacy by making that call. An early decision will be required by their successors. Momentum will accumulate in the interim.

Barbara Tuchman defined the challenge when she wrote that to “... halt the momentum of an accepted idea, to re-examine assumptions, is a disturbing process and requires more courage than governments can generally summon.” Policy formulation is not for the faint of heart.

Word Count: 12,588

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¹¹ Dean Acheson Present at the Creation, New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1969 p449

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²⁴ Ibid., p 485

²⁵ Sir Duff Cooper "The Plow and the Furrow" Foreign Affairs. Volume 29 No.1 October 1950 p6

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Article 107 states "Nothing in the present Charter shall invalidate or preclude action, in relation to any state which during the Second World War has been an enemy of any signatory to the present Charter, taken or authorized as a result of that war by the Governments having responsibility for such action."

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⁵⁶ Memorandum from George M. Elsey to Mr. James Jay, Executive Secretary NSC July 12, 1950 Documentary History of the Truman Presidency. p219

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- ⁶³ Ibid., pp502-510
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